

Introduction: Indian Democracy and Elections

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Introduction

Indian Democracy and Elections

Fair and free elections are the most important necessary condition for any democratic system to work in the contemporary world. In addition, a party system, which performs the function of aggregating and summarising the various “public opinions” in society and packing them into effective policy in a peaceful way, is the other necessary condition for a modern democracy. Among the major developing countries, India is a unique case in a sense that it has basically maintained both of the necessary conditions since Independence in 1947, in spite of the seemingly very unfavourable socio-economic situations for the survival of democracy. The backward socio-economic conditions seemed to be a serious handicap for the development of parliamentary democracy. Initial conditions such as wide-spread poverty, the highly feudalistic and stratified social structure as represented by the caste system, and ethnic complexity in terms of language, religion, etc., appeared to be negative factors hindering the sound evolution of political participation by the populace. They looked like the insurmountable obstacles to the evolution of a party system. Despite these conditions, though, Indian democracy has been and remains, by and large, resilient and stable, though there was a brief suspension of the democratic system from 1975 to 1977 with the declaration of a state of internal emergency. At present, India is said to be the largest functioning democracy in the world.

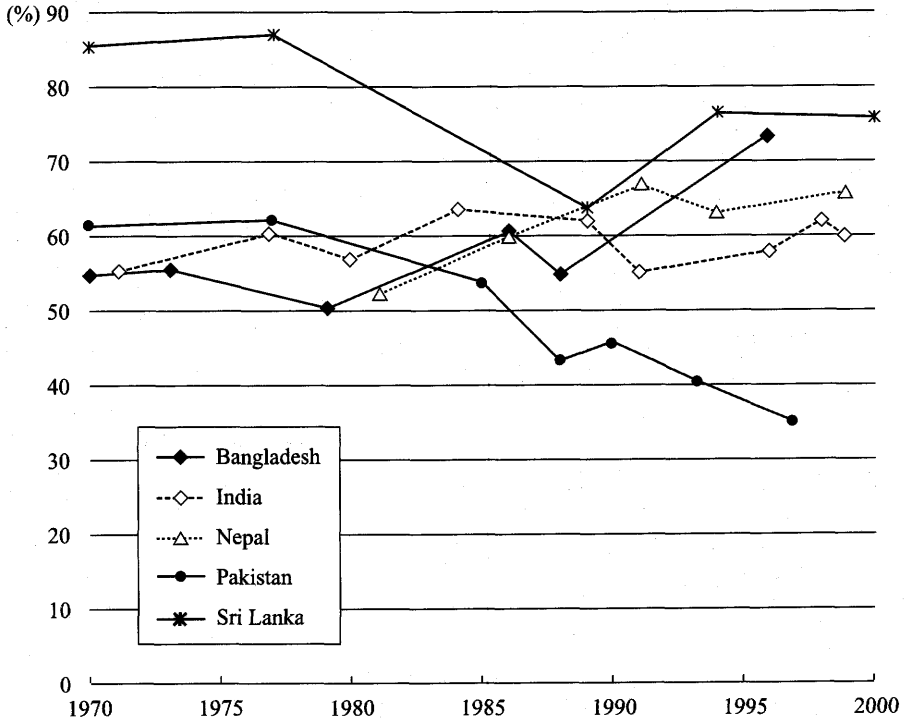
It is true that the Indian democratic system has serious limitations as a form of majoritarian rule. The cases of Jammu and Kashmir are typical evidence of the limitations. The interventionist and sometimes repressive policy of the central government against Jammu and Kashmir State are illustrations of the limitations of majoritarian democracy. The secessionist movements in the north-eastern part of the country, which are based on ethnicity, are another problems limiting the legitimacy of Indian majoritarian democracy. However, it is also pointed out that India has been making efforts to mitigate these limitations within the democratic framework of federalism,

though these attempts cannot be said to have been successful so far.¹ But the achievements and value of Indian democracy itself, such as substantial political freedom for the majority, cannot be denied.² The substantial political freedom has been guaranteed by the multi-layered system of elections. The system of elections in India is the central mechanism for the functioning of the democratic system, and is therefore worth studying. At the apex of Indian federalism, there are the upper and lower Houses in the Union. The Lok Sabha (House of the People) is the lower house and is constituted on the basis of direct election through universal adult-franchise. The Rajya Sabha (Council of States) is an upper house consisting of members elected indirectly from the States. At the State level, there is a Legislative Assembly and some large States have an additional house in the form of a Legislative Council, which is generally constituted on the basis of indirect elections. At the district level and below, there is the Panchayat system, a kind of local body that deals mainly with rural development and minor judiciary issues. This multi-layered election system and peoples' participation in it is the core element that gives dynamism and impetus to the democratic process in India.

Conversely, it can be said that the performance of elections serves as a barometer of the level of legitimacy of a regime. In any country, it can be said that voter turnout is a good indicator of the level of legitimacy of a particular regime in a particular period, as long as the election is conducted in a free and fair manner.

A typical example from contemporary South Asia is the case of Pakistan, which is shown in Figure i-1. Pakistan was democratised in 1988, after President General Ziaul Haq's mysterious death in a plane crash. However, successive civilian governments, including those under Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party's and Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League, were not able to provide stable and efficient governance for the country. This was the most fundamental reason why the successive civilian governments failed to maintain legitimacy, and, as a result, suffered interference from the authoritarian elements of the President and the military behind the President. Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party's government was dismissed in 1990, with the ostensible reasons including corruption, abuse of power, and failure of the maintenance of public order. Nawaz Sharif's Islamic Jamhoori Ittehad government was also dismissed by the President in 1993, as was Bhutto's second government in 1996. In the course of the process of "firing and hiring," the legitimacy of the civilian government gradually fell,³ as shown in the declining turnout rate after 1990 in Figure i-1. The declining turnout seems to indicate that the military coup by the military under

Figure i-1
Voter Turnout in the Lower Houses Elections
in the Five South Asian Countries, 1970–2000



Source: Made by the author mainly from the materials shown below:

- Nepal:** Election Commission (Kingdom of Nepal). 1992. *General Election in Nepal 1991*. Kathmandu: Nepal Lithographing; ———. n.d. *House of Representative Election 1994: Election Result*. Kathmandu: Election Commission Press; ———. n.d. *House of Representative Election 2056: Election Result*. Kathmandu: Election Commission offset press.
- Bangladesh:** Thiagarajah, Jeevan (ed.). 1997. *Governance and Electoral Process in Bangladesh: Report of the Non-Governmental Election Observers from South Asia (SAARC) Parliamentary Elections, June 12th 1996—Bangladesh*. New Delhi: Vikas; Alauddin, Mohammad (ed.). 1999. *Development, Governance and the Environment in South Asia: A Focus on Bangladesh*. Brisbane: Macmillan.
- Pakistan:** Election Commission of Pakistan. 1991. *Report on The General Elections 1990, Volume I*. Islamabad: Printing Corporation of Pakistan Press; *The Herald*. 1997. March.
- India:** Election Commission of India, Reports of General Election of various Lok Sabha elections (See also at, <http://www.eci.gov.in/ARCHIVE>).
- Sri Lanka:** Commissioner of Elections (Government of Sri Lanka). n.d. *Parliamentary*

General Election, 16th August, 1994—Detailed Results. Sri Jayewardenepura: Department of Elections; ———. n.d. *Parliamentary General Election, 10th October, 2000—Detailed Results.* Sri Jayewardenepura: Department of Elections; Department of Census and Statistics. 2000. *Statistical Abstract of the Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka 1999.* Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics; See also at, <http://www.agora.stm.it/elections/election/srilanka.htm> (accessed: 20 March 2001).

Notes:

- 1) Bangladesh was democratised in 1990: Turnout of National Assembly: The value for 1970 is the voter turnout of only East Pakistan. The election in 1986 was seriously criticised as an unfair election.
- 2) India: Turnout of Lok Sabha
- 3) Nepal was democratised in 1990: Turnout of House of Representatives: The values for 1981 and 86 are the voter turnout of the elections to the partyless State Panchayat system.
- 4) Pakistan was democratised in 1988: Turnout of National Assembly: Value for 1970 is the voter turnout of only West Pakistan. The value of the 1977 election is shown as it is, though the election was strongly criticised as unfair. Political parties were prohibited in the 1985 election.
- 5) Sri Lanka: Turnout of Parliament: In the 1989 election, the voter turnout is remarkably low in the northern, eastern and some other areas, because of the election boycott pressed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna. The election boycott pressed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam also led to remarkably lower voter turnouts in the 1994 and 2000 elections in the northern and eastern part of the country.

General Pervez Musharraf in October 1999 was, in a sense, a terminal point in the process of the delegitimisation of the successive civilian governments.

The case of Sri Lanka, which has the highest turnout level among the five nations of South Asia, demonstrates the fundamental robustness of its democratic system, despite the serious ethnic confrontation since the 1980s. The ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils had been brewing since the 1950s through the process of electoral politics in the form of the “Sinhala only” policy, which was a typical demonstration of the limitations of majoritarian democracy, and was a grave obstacle for Tamil people.⁴ Elections could not be held in a normal way in the northern part of Sri Lanka, and the turnouts there were very low from the 1980s to 1990s. However, the point to be emphasised is that in spite of the civil war situation, the electoral system has been maintained and the parliamentary democracy has been functioning without major breaks in the Sinhalese areas. There is no doubt that the traditionalisation of the electoral and parliamentary system,

which began with the so-called "Donoughmore Constitution" in 1931 during the British colonial period, contributed to the robustness. It can be said that electoral and parliamentary institutions can survive major political difficulties once they have accumulated legitimacy among the majority of the people over a long period of time. The high turnout level in Sri Lanka seems to be indicative of this fact.

In India too, voter turnout can be seen as an appropriate indicator of the level of the legitimacy of the political system. For example, the turnouts were much lower than usual in Punjab in the 1991 Lok Sabha and the 1992 Assembly elections. Clearly, this was a result of the violent turbulence beginning in 1984 caused by Hindu-Sikh ethnic strife aggravated by political intervention by the Central government under Indira Gandhi. It was the social and political chaos resulting in the degradation of the political legitimacy of both the State and Central governments, which lowered the turnouts.⁵ In Assam, the sudden drop in the turnout rate in the 1983 Assembly election was the consequence of the ethnic conflict between native Assamese and non-Assamese, particularly Bengalese migrating from outside of Assam.⁶

Thus, the analysis of election data has the potential to reveal various aspects of politics of a society, as long as elections are conducted on a free and fair basis. One of the main purposes of this book is to give a long-term and bird's-eye view of the voting behaviour of the Indian electorate, through the macro statistical data from Lok Sabha elections. It is possible that long-term socio-economic changes may have some significant influence on voting behaviour, and socio-economic conditions have changed tremendously since Independence. Primary education has spread and traditional rigid social stratifications, such as the caste system, have been gradually loosened. Government and other modern institutions have acquired increasing importance in ordinary life. The economy has been developed and modernised, and economic change has accelerated since 1991 when the structural reform and liberalisation was begun. Of course, there is still massive poverty, but we cannot deny the achievement of India since Independence.

The statistical study in this book is made on the assumption that there is no major systematic bias in the Indian electoral system in favour of any particular parties, skewing the statistical figures of the election results. Of course, we know that there are many anomalies in the real functioning of elections, such as corruption and violence, but still Indian elections have been, by and large, the most fair and free among the major developing countries. There are exceptions, however: elections in Jammu and Kashmir

State.⁷ It is not my intention, as I just mentioned, to deny the over-all performance of Indian democracy. However, we cannot help but point out that there have been many defects and anomalies in the elections in Jammu and Kashmir. This is the basic reason why I have omitted the statistical analysis of data from Jammu and Kashmir in this volume.

Notes

- ¹ Concerning this point, see, Manor, James. 1998. "Making Federalism Work." *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 9, No. 3, July; Kohli, Atul. 1998. "Can Democracies Accommodate Ethnic Nationalism?—The Rise and Decline of Self-Determination Movements in India." in Basu, Amrita and Atul Kohli. (eds.). *Community Conflicts and The State in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- ² Concerning this point, see, for example, Chadda, Maya. 2000. *Building Democracy in South Asia—India, Nepal, Pakistan*. New Delhi: Vistaar; Kohli, Atul (ed.). 2001. *The Success of India's Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ³ See, for example, Rizvi, Hasan-Askari. 2000. *Military, State and Society in Pakistan*. Hampshire: Macmillan, Chapter 11.
- ⁴ Concerning the development of Sri Lankan democracy, especially the aspect of ethnic strife in democracy, see, for example, Silva, K. M. de. 1993. *Sri Lanka—Problems of Governance*. New Delhi: Konark; Warnapala, W. A. Wiswa. 1994. *Ethnic Strife and Politics in Sri Lanka: An Investigation into Demands and Responses*. New Delhi: Navrang.
- ⁵ See, for example, Singh, Gurharpal. 2000. *Ethnic Conflict in India: A Case-Study of Punjab*. Houndmills: Macmillan, Chapter 9.
- ⁶ See, Baruah, Sanjib. 1999. *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 6.
- ⁷ It is difficult to make a neutral and non-partisan evaluation of the actual functioning of elections in Jammu and Kashmir. However, many studies have pointed out unfair interference by the State or central governments in the elections. See, for example, Quraishi, Zaheer Masood. 1979. *Elections & State Politics of India (A Case-Study of Kashmir)*. Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan; Noorani, A. G. 1996. "Kashmir Elections under Delhi Sponsored Terrorists." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3 August; Naqash, Nasir A. and G. M. Shah. 1997. *Kashmir: From Crisis to Crisis*. New Delhi: APH Publishing; Gauhar, G.N. 2002. *Elections in Jammu and Kashmir*. New Delhi: Manas Publications.